

trace evidence | the uncertainty of the real

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A matinee jacket. A bike with a spinning wheel. A set of car keys. A wind-cheater. The mundane traces of those who vanish. Ordinary objects forced to function as a synecdoche for the person, a stand-in for the Real. For they are the emblems of trauma, indexical of loss, representational of that old familiar sadness: the lost object of desire. Our ordinariness is never more apparent than in the small things we leave behind; the only remnants left of our personhood, our individuality, our very existence. The objects stand in for our fleeting, momentary understandings of subjectivity. If we should vanish, however, these everyday items assume an importance far beyond their usual capacity to evoke our memory in those who cared for us. They become iconic, embodying a mystery of their own, a haunting quality which insists on their own substantive reality even as it suggests the extraordinarily complete lack of the person who owned and used them. The individual is desired yet lost, the object is found yet essentially unwanted.

This paper will investigate the impact of these trace items through their evocation of the everyday, and their concomitant and terrifying function as sublime objects in the Lacanian sense, as positive, material objects elevated to the status of the impossible Thing.¹ For, in looking at these things, we ‘gain an insight into the forbidden domain, into a space that should be left unseen’.² These found objects are both *meaningful* in that they provide ‘evidence’ of an event which we can only ever imagine and never truly know. Yet they are also *meaningless*, in themselves merely remnants, symbolising nothing. In this sense, they are the epitome of terror, the materialisation of the impossible. Any meaning we assign to them serves only to further obscure the impact of their presence. These discarded objects become

the Real: 'the rock against which every attempt at symbolisation stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes); but at the same time ... is thoroughly precarious; ... persist[ing] only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolv[ing] as soon as we try to grasp its positive nature'.³ For this Real, as Žižek tells us, is precisely what defines the nature of the traumatic event, producing both a plethora and a lack of symbolisation, constructed backwards from its effects, remaining forever a 'fantasy-construct'⁴ defying knowledge and belying the certainty of things.

MARILYN⁵

21 March 1972, 7.42 am. Fourteen-year-old Eimeo schoolgirl, Marilyn Joy Wallman, disappears while riding her bicycle through the canefields to the school bus stop at the nearby Rural Youth Hall. Following ten minutes behind her, Marilyn's brothers come to a dip in the road where they find her abandoned bicycle. The carrier basket is detached. The bicycle wheel still spins ominously. Marilyn's open school port, lunch and books lie scattered on the road alongside the bicycle. Two drills in from the edge of the cane, a neighbour, Mr Solojinkins, finds Marilyn's school hat. A white hat, adorned with blue trim and a band, it appears to have been thrown.

Grainy black and white images of the crime scene show the discarded bicycle, school bag and books strewn across the scrub, beside the narrow bitumen road. Wallman's Road.

Another faded press photograph shows a weary Daphne Wallman standing in her daughter's bedroom. The room has been kept the same as the day Marilyn left. The study desk is neat and tidy. A photograph of Marilyn at primary school graces the desk-top. Fighting back tears, Mrs Wallman tells the reporter:

The other children don't touch anything of Marilyn's. That's in case she comes home, then adds wistfully, I suppose it's only a game of pretence.⁶

Decades pass. No sign of Marilyn. Instead, Marilyn's school port and hat are returned to her parents in pristine condition. Mrs Wallman reflects:

We do what we have to do. But it never leaves you. You see the bike sprawled there and then there's nothing at all. It's like something just came from the sky and ripped her off her bike and then nothing, nothing.⁷

In this paper we're going to write about things; about the material ties that bind. In doing so, we're going to perforce write about ourselves; about how we keep our 'selves' anchored

to the ground through the very things we are most attached to, yet not inevitably conscious of. We may all be aware of the moments left the living when someone dies, when one chances upon a teacup, or a hair tie, or a favourite worn out shirt, that once belonged to the one who is gone, and of how seeing that fragment of that life undoes us, fracturing our fragile acceptance of the death, making our loss more real than we ever wanted. However, when one chances upon the object possessed by someone who has disappeared, the loss is both felt and not felt simultaneously: the item forces acknowledgement that the person is no longer with us, yet it fails to completely negate the tantalising possibility of a miraculous return. The things owned by the disappeared, thus, are different to all other objects, invoking the peculiar cruelty of the not-known, the forever uncertain.

Here, we will investigate the dual impact of these items, through their evocation of the everyday, and through their elevation to the status of the sublime object. We will use these things that mean both *nothing* and *everything* at the same time, to attempt to unpack the conundrum at the heart of the Real, to show how the ordinary can also be a manifestation of the impossible and the unsymbolisable. The very nature of these things, as objects discarded or lost during a disappearance, lends them greater significance than items left behind due to known and grieved death. For more is expected of these things; the demand that they somehow tell a story of the inexplicable is insistent; their inability to mask the void of the Real, the traumatic horror of a vanishing, more evident than at any other time in the life of any other thing. When someone dies, even if they died tragically and unexpectedly, their things are not placed in the position of the final witnesses to a completely inexplicable event: they may help to reconstruct the story of how someone died, but they aren't asked to do the impossible and tell us how the person left, nor if there is any possibility that they might come home. This is the horror the items left by the vanished must face; their inability to provide any certainty is the horror the searchers for the missing must inevitably confront. Things can't suture the rent in communal consciousness that occurs when someone simply disappears, all they can do is to be inadequate stand-ins for the person, mute witnesses burdened with more significance than should ever be due them.

Robert Romanyshyn observed in *Technology As Symptom and Dream*, that our identities are inextricably linked to the things we own, as we trust them implicitly to 'function as extensions of ourselves, reflections and echoes of who we are, were, and will become'.⁸ Lost things, thus, are troubling to us for more reason than simple inconvenience. For things, according to Romanyshyn, are 'witnesses and reflections and producers of our continuing identity'.⁹ The loss of our things is tragic because it intensifies our relation to death. Displaced or lost things haunt us and as symptoms of our own selfhood they remind us of a life which has lost touch with the world.¹⁰ Of course, not all things necessarily provoke this reaction of fear within us. Instead it is rather the things that *matter*, that can *explain* us, rather than those

which have a higher economic price, that are the important, self-reflecting things. Without these things, those little traces of material culture in our possession, we are not our 'selves', and cannot maintain the pretence of selfhood.

It is hard enough, then, for others to encompass the loss of self evident in items abandoned due to death. Imagine, if you will, how much more difficult it is to consider these vacant articles when someone simply disappears; when someone really is, or could be, in the very next room, as that trite poem frequently trotted out at funerals suggests. For in these cases, these precious things that comfort the bereaved, are denied the family and friends of the disappeared. Instead, they become 'evidence', untouchable, non-reclaimable, police property, even when the case remains officially 'open', but has grown cold. A cold worse than death, because 'cold' cases mean that the disappearance itself is now as abandoned as the things shelved in boxes in warehouses; things that used to be important, germane to the missing person search, vital as identifiers should that person be found. Cold cases mean no one is going to be found, and even if they were to be located, their precious belongings at the time of the search would no longer be of use to them. Then even their status as evidence is revoked. For that person has indeed vanished, grown up, moved on, and may not even remember or recognise the little keepsakes kept for years in police vaults, sometimes released finally, and far too late, to the family who will always claim them.

The abandoned things of the disappeared, thus, are terrifying objects. For they suggest that either the person has had the markers of their identity, the symptoms of their selfhood, involuntarily removed, or they have deliberately removed them themselves. In either case, this sloughing off of the self indicates its all too easy removal of such in ourselves. If their very persons can so easily become our 'lost objects', then how easily might we become the same to others. Keeping our things about us is vital to keep this fear at bay, and to remembering who we are and who they were, but who they can never continue to be.

— AZARIA¹¹

Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton describes her daughter:

Azaria was flesh and blood. She laughed and she cried and she talked like you and me. It's no good saying, she was only a few weeks old, she was just a baby, and didn't have a personality. She knew and she understood.¹²

— TAKE ONE. THE JUMPSUIT.

A week after Azaria's disappearance, tourist Wally Goodwin and his family are walking through a track near the rockface, close to a dingo's lair. Wally's daughter, who is walking a little ahead

of him, suddenly stops and screams. Wally catches sight of a torn and bloodied baby's jumpsuit. Years later, Wally tells Lindy that what had frightened his daughter so much 'was the fact that the jumpsuit was sitting on its back, slightly concertinaed with the feet rounded and pointing upwards as if the lower part of the baby's legs were still inside'.¹³

— TAKE TWO. THE BLACK DRESS.

It's a plain black dress with contrasting red ribbons and buttons.

The most popular exhibit in the National Museum, it's been described as 'the dress that fuelled a thousand ugly rumours', and 'the dress that got tongues wagging and split a nation'.¹⁴

Look. Listen. Pause.

Somewhere a disclaimer's being punched into the keys of an old manual typewriter: 'This is *not* the outfit Azaria was taken in'.

Look. Listen. Pause.

Lindy Chamberlain tells a reporter from the *Courier Mail*:

'Yes, we have a black dress. I like black. I made it for Regan. Michael hates it.'¹⁵

— TAKE THREE. THE MATINEE JACKET.

Under cross examination, Lindy describes it as a white knitted Marquis matinee jacket, Size 000, with a pale lemon edging.

According to the Crown it's a mythical object, a lie, a fabrication.

Five and a half years later, whilst searching for the missing body parts of an English tourist, a volunteer discovers an item of clothing protruding from the earth.

No limbs. No bones. No blood.

Instead, a baby's matinee jacket.

Weathered. Faded. Dirt-stained.

Lindy recognises it immediately as Azaria's jacket.

The yellow edging is still visible.

Traces of elastic wind in and out of the sleeves.

The top button is missing.

In Lindy's words, the 'lie' has been found.¹⁶

There has been much written about the importance of things. Indeed, Bill Brown has even coined the phrase 'thing theory' to describe these various jottings.¹⁷ In much 'thing theory'

things are considered as one of two vehicles for cultural meaning. They are either gifts or commodities, and these two categories are often positioned at either ends of a continuum. As a 'gift', a thing usually has more sentimental value, although it may be of practical use too, and it often symbolises close ties between the giver and the receiver. Commodities, on the other hand, are impersonal, and there is a distance, frequently a great distance, between the buyer or receiver of the commodity and its seller or provider. According to some theorists, a commodity has monetary value, whereas a gift may or may not have economic worth.¹⁸ So, it might be surmised, then, that things are indicative of social relationships; either between kin and friendship networks, or the more impersonal kind found in the broader community.

The things we write of here, however, have no such status. They can't fit into the neat gift—commodity continuum proposed by the likes of Bronislaw Malinowski or Lewis Hyde. For our things are both discarded, dropped, shed, forgotten, and yet at the same time, they are items of evidence, vital pieces in a heartless puzzle. They acquire that which Arjun Appadurai has called a 'cultural biography'¹⁹ which has nothing to do with whether or not they were ever gifts or commodities or something in between. They gain a life of their own. Their trajectory through life, the experiences they gather if you like, gives them meaning. They have endured hardship, separation, connection, sentimental significance, and even, at times, economic worth, although this is not a prerequisite for a thing to gain a cultural biography. The thing that becomes a marker of a person manages to surpass its ordinary 'thing' status, its own innate nothingness, to transcend itself as evidence of love, selfhood, disappearance. These things are not inert pieces of metal or plastic or wood, they become vehicles of meaning, like words they create an 'informational communication system'.²⁰ In the case of the disappeared, such things become uncanny, revealing our hidden fears, showing the emptiness behind all our pretences at wholeness, at selfhood. Their cultural biography speaks of pain, of loss, of disconnection in a way that no amount of words, regardless of who speaks them, ever could. The forgotten bicycle lying on the track, once the favourite item of its vanished owner; the unusual baby dress used to help convict the child's mother of murder, tell us so much more of the truncated lives of these people than expressions of grief, or sympathy, or revenge. For they testify, in their muteness, their dumb existence, to the person that was, who once owned and was in some way defined by them. Yet, at the same time, they still remain stubbornly material: the bike is still just a bike, the dress still just a dress. They may be used to signify the person who owned them, but they also keep their own silent counsel, reminding us that we can place too much importance on things, and especially on things belonging to the vanished. They can only ever give us a momentary glance at the uncanny, at selfhood itself, before they once again hide in the very substance of their being at all.

— Ross²¹

21st July 1989, WIN TV weatherman Ross Warren spends the night out with a friend, 'Steve',²² visiting Darlinghurst bars:

The Oxford Hotel

Gilligan's Cocktail Bar

The Vault

The Midnight Shift

22 July 1989, 2 am, Ross leaves 'Steve' at Taylor Square.

According to him, Warren was in a good frame of mind.

No, he was not depressed.

Ross Warren.

175cm tall

medium build

fair complexion

short brown hair

green to hazel eyes

Caucasian appearance

When last seen he was wearing:

Black shoes

Blue jeans

A white turtle neck shirt

And a black sports coat

— SHOT ONE. THE CAR.

Two days later, Ross's friends report him missing to the Paddington Police Station. A report is logged. They drive down to Marks Park in South Bondi to conduct their own search. In nearby Kenneth Street, they discover Ross's car.

A brown coloured Nissan Pulsar. Registration number NZC 783.

The car is locked. There's no sign of Ross.

Police say there's nothing unusual about an abandoned car.

Quote 'this was a regular haunt for homosexuals of nocturnal habits' Unquote.

Days later, when police search the car they find Ross's wallet containing \$70, his driver's license, Visa card, personal papers, and crumpled McDonald's wrappers.

— SHOT TWO. THE KEYS.

After finding the car, Ross's friends discover his car keys.

Eight in total, on a distinctive key ring.

Located in a pocket on a cliff ledge, not far from the water's edge.

More than a decade later, on a police walk-through video, another friend, 'Andrew',²³ admits he was too scared to touch the keys.

He knew then 'something bad' had happened to Ross.

Early in 2005, the State Coroner rules that a gang of youths almost certainly threw Ross off the cliffs.

The detective from the original investigation asserts:

There was no-one else involved.

He may have slipped. He may have jumped.

He suicided. He staged his own disappearance.

The car is locked.

The keys are lost.

They were never fingerprinted.

The detective insists:

The keys were wet.

There was no point.

His mother said:

I spoke to Ross that night.

There was nothing out of the ordinary.

He didn't jump.

Our sad fragments are forced to take the place of the individualised, singular person who has vanished. Instead of misplaced things, so easy to replace in general, we now have misplaced people whose things are *not* easy to replace, which indeed *cannot* be replaced, because they must function as evidence of the last moments, indeed the very life itself, of the one who previously, obviously, owned them. They in effect *become* the person, or at least a synecdoche for that person; a tiny piece now forced to represent the whole. Azaria's little black dress, currently displayed in the National Museum, is filled with the missing body of its owner, even though it didn't even travel with her to Ayer's Rock, as it was then commonly known.

Marilyn's bicycle, its one wheel ever spinning, embeds itself in one's consciousness as the very vehicle of her flight into nowhere, her legs still peddling, her bag and hat still falling. Ross's keys lodged in a cliff ledge tell us of his appalling fall onto the rocks, into the sea, while continuing to indicate his possession of a now suddenly vacant apartment, complete with his empty clothes, his redundant taste in music, furnishings, art. The things are swamped with life, while the bodies cannot even tell us of their deaths. We hang on to these 'effects' as objects that are out of time, out of communal understanding, out of any continuum commonly belonging to things. We can't let them go—there is nowhere to bury them, to put their owners to rest. Yet we know that although they are the epitome of presence, they are also the quintessence of absence; of loss never to be resolved.

These things—this matinee jacket, this set of keys, this bicycle—are now sublime objects in the Lacanian sense. In looking at these things, we 'gain an insight into the forbidden domain, into a space that should be left unseen'.²⁴ Yet, the objects are not in and of themselves 'sublime'; on their own they do not necessarily indicate the forbidden, the hidden. Rather, they are everyday things, elevated, due to our recognition of their structural position, to the level of the 'impossible-real object of desire'.²⁵ For these things are not indicative of some other order of objects, beneath which we might unearth the 'truth' behind the disappearance cases in which they function. Rather, they, as Lacanian sublime objects, mask only a void, an emptiness we are all unable to face. They both cover up, and uncover, the terrifying moment of a vanishing. They are the only witnesses to an inexplicable event; one we both can't imagine because it is so cleverly masked; and yet, one we can imagine only too well through crime scene photos, through empty school bags, discarded keys, weathered and damaged matinee jackets.

These things left behind force us to witness the incredible. They both provide too much meaning and not enough. They can tell us something of what has happened, yet at the same time, reveal nothing. For, as Žižek explains, one cannot get too close to a sublime object. If one does, it becomes only an ordinary vulgar piece of merchandise; which is, of course, *all it is*, and yet that which *it must not be*. Any meaning we manage to assign these remnants serves only to obscure further the impact of their presence, which *must* persist 'only in an interspace, in an intermediate state'.²⁶ If we demand to see them in any other setting than 'from a certain perspective, half seen',²⁷ they dissipate themselves, precisely because they are nothing at all.²⁸ The more we look, examine, take apart, reassemble, the less likely we are to find what we seek. Regardless of what CSI and other such TV programs may show, discarded school bags, old matinee jackets, lost keys, don't, by themselves, solve disappearance cases. They merely reach out to us, as presages of the unavoidable eruption of the Real we are forced to contemplate, but they do so only as chimera.

Symbolisation is rent through traumatic events, such as the disappearance cases considered here. There is no real possibility they can ever be 'read' through the few things, the 'clues', left behind. For trauma automatically indicates a failure to adequately symbolise or to 'speak' the event; any traumatic event must be constituted backwards from its effects.²⁹ The trauma itself remains unspeakable; only the evidence of its impact, on both persons and things, is really available for analysis. Yet even the impacts are 'fantasy constructs', developed afterwards. In Cathy Caruth's words: 'The traumatized [like the things discarded at the sites of these disappearances] ... carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess'.³⁰ In other words, the trauma victim is both repeatedly drawn to the intense 'reality' of the event, often including an obsession with the things that pertain to that event, remaining both unable to shrug it off, yet unable to live with it. This does not mean that traumatic events cannot be spoken of at all. Rather, as in Lindy Chamberlain's case, a story can be told, however, the *actual trauma* itself, the sheer horror, the *feelings* that underlie the neat story structure, cannot be adequately rendered to suit either court or media narratives. The base elements of the tale, who did what, or said what, and when, and to whom, may be able to be recorded, but this *in no way* accesses the fear, the hopelessness, nor the cruelty of nagging hope, lingering always beneath. Trauma both provides us with the greatest opportunity we will ever have to face the Real directly, yet perforce demands total numbing, wherein 'immediacy ... may take the form of belatedness'.³¹ This is largely due to the idea that when people are exposed to traumatic events, they literally experience 'speechless terror' whereby their experience cannot be conveyed in words and symbols.³² The memory, then, becomes somehow timeless, trapped in an everlasting present with no possibility of a tomorrow. Those who attempt to speak trauma become wordless, even when they are most willing to 'tell their stories', because they know that 'their most complicated recollections are unrelated to time' and thus can't *be* told in classic 'story' formation, with a beginning, middle and end.³³ Rather, the constant immediacy of the trauma invokes the numbed belatedness of its telling, leaving only a void in the psyche which can never be adequately expressed.³⁴ We can't approach the Real directly, indeed it seems even 'reality' is beyond our grasp.

Like psyches, the things left behind are unreliable witnesses. For, in their obstinate *existence* they are both unable to entirely mask the horrible void of meaninglessness and impossibility, and yet are forced, as sublime objects, to appear to do so. In this way, the conundrum of the Real is allowed to mercifully recede taking both its positivity and its precariousness with it.³⁵ The trace evidence, epitomised by these discarded objects, is thus emblematic of a Real upon whose 'rock' any of our pathetic attempts at symbolisation are dashed. It reminds us again of the hard kernel at the heart of the Real against which we hammer in search of 'truth' or 'meaning', but whose incapacity to mean anything defies all our best efforts. Yet, these dis-

appearance cases, these moments of horrendous lucidity, also demonstrate the precariousness of the Real, which we have always already failed to catch, which we have ‘missed, in a shadow; and which ‘dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature’.³⁶ We may see, but we cannot ‘know’. We may collect ‘evidence’, but it will show us only lack. We may honour the forgotten relic, but it will only increase our desire for the lost object. The Real retains its place as a ‘fantasy construct’, then, after which we both pine in our quest for certainty, even while we are keenly aware of the cruelty of its whimsy.

The few things left behind might well give us a glimmer of the materiality so desperately craved, yet so impossible, in disappearance cases, but they nevertheless retain a haunting quality which simultaneously insists on their own physical reality, even as they embody our overwhelming desire for the one who is lost. They both preserve their sanctity as the things the vanished person last touched, last held; *and* they provide incontrovertible evidence of the extraordinarily complete lack of that person, reminding us forever of our ‘lost object of desire’ indicating both the missing person and our naive faith in continuity.

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1. Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p.71.
 2. Zizek, p. 71.
 3. Zizek, p. 169.
 4. Zizek, p. 169.
 5. Marilyn Wallman disappeared from her home in Eimeo, near Mackay in Queensland, on 21 March 1972, while riding her bicycle through the canefields to the school bus stop at the end of Wallman’s Road. No trace of Marilyn has ever been found since.
 6. *Sunday Sun* [Brisbane], 18 March 1973.
 7. *Woman’s Day*, 27 September 1999.
 8. Robert Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 193.
 9. Romanyshyn, p. 193.
 10. Romanyshyn, p. 194.

11. Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from her parent's tent while they were camping at Ayer's Rock (as Uluru was then known) in July 1990. Despite the baby's nappy and jumpsuit ultimately being found, bearing marks of an attack by dingoes, the baby's body has never been located. Lindy Chamberlain, the child's mother, was convicted of her murder. Her conviction was quashed in 1988, and she was completely exonerated of any part in her daughter's disappearance.
12. Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton, *Through My Eyes*, East Street Publications, Adelaide, 2004, p. 19.
13. Chamberlain-Creighton, p. 82.
14. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 2005.
15. *Courier-Mail*, 7 September 1980, cited in Chamberlain-Creighton, 2004.
16. Chamberlain-Creighton, p. 527.
17. Bill Brown, 'Things', *Critical Inquiry* Fall, 2001, p. 22.
18. A. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 3.
19. Arjan Appadurai, cited in Komter, 2005, p. 4
20. Arjan Appadurai, cited in Komter, 2005, p. 15.
21. Ross Warren was one of three victims considered murdered in a gay hate crime by a gang operating in the Bondi-Tamarama walkway/Marks Park area during 1989–1990. An inquest into these deaths was undertaken in 2003, and concluded in 2005, but no perpetrators were formally charged. Ross Warren's body has never been recovered.
22. The name of Ross's friend has been suppressed by the coroner who conducted the inquest into Ross's death/disappearance.
23. This friend's name was also suppressed at the inquest.
24. Zizek, p. 71.
25. Zizek, p. 194.
26. Zizek, p. 170.
27. Zizek, p. 170.
28. Zizek, p. 170.
29. Zizek, p. 169.
30. Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, p. 5.
31. Caruth, p. 6.
32. Van der Kolk cited in Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, p. 172.
33. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, p. 177.
34. Cohen and Kingston cited in Caruth, p. 6.
35. Zizek, p. 169.
36. Zizek, p. 169.